

Doing Administrative Histories

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Administrative histories have become pivotal documents for park managers. They contain essential contextual information to support management decisions as well as basic histories of parks and National Park Service actions there. In an agency in which frequent personnel turnover is a fact of life, such a document is often the best link between past and present that a new superintendent, administrator, or ranger can find.

For administrative histories to function in this manner, they must be solid, professional documents written with specific purposes in mind. They should combine chronological narratives with topical treatments of principal activities to create analytical syntheses of the key issues at individual parks.

In most cases an administrative history will begin with a brief look at the natural and cultural history of the area before it became part of the national park system. This chapter is usually based on secondary sources, often incorporating interpretive material from the park, and serves to set the stage.

Following the initial chapter, a series of chapters outlining the history of the park establishes the context for the park. A chapter explaining the founding of the park is the first step. It should demonstrate the political and cultural forces that influenced the process, issues of land acquisition, and other related factors.

From this point Park Service history usually breaks along clear faultlines. Chronological eras can be used to locate individual parks in the larger picture of agency history. The period from the establishment of the Service in 1916 to the New Deal offers clear management patterns. The New Deal, the lull that followed during the Second World War, and the boom that the end of the war initiated usually group together in a useful fashion. Mission 66, the Service's major 1956–66 development program, initiates a series of changes of its own, followed by what is most easily described as the “modern era” of park management. Depending on the age of the park and the idiosyncracies of its history, these divisions can be used to create a context in which park-specific decisions and policies can be related to those of the Service as a whole.

With a chronological history of the park established, topical chapters can be used to articulate the complexities of park management. Again, individual parks vary, but topical treatments of such issues as local relations, interpretation, resources management, archeology, and threats to the park are often appropriate. These chapters provide an issue-by-issue account of the park through its various functions, useful for managers of park divisions as well as superintendents and higher-level officials.

The blending of chronological and topical histories creates a complete document. A new superintendent can use such a history as an orientation to the management issues of the park. In the topical chapters, division chiefs can trace the histories of their specific concerns.

To fulfill park needs, administrative histories must cover complex and often controversial issues. These can include everything from relations with other federal agencies—in some locations a prime source of conflict—to the management of exotic species. Threats to the integrity of parks are another key issue, for they have escalated in quantity and severity in recent decades. Opposition to park policies requires coverage as well, for each party in the mosaic of competing interests that swirl around parks is entitled to accurate and fair representation. Administrative historians often find that they have to negotiate a minefield of conflicting objectives.

Because of the importance of recent decisions and actions in any park area, administrative historians must also be careful and thorough oral historians. Not only must they have good professional relations with park staff, they must be able to work closely with prior employees, park neighbors, and in many cases park opponents. Interviews can be complicated. People are not equally receptive, and everyone's memory contains an incomplete picture of the story. It is best to rely on oral history for shading rather than chronology, for detail and characterization rather than context.

Perhaps the most important thing for administrative historians to keep in mind is their audience. Most people who read and use administrative histories are not historians. They are managers, often pressed for time, who seek analytical summaries of issues affecting them. This demands three crucial traits from the historian: brevity, clear writing, and concise analysis illustrated with pertinent examples. Written in this manner, administrative histories can be both good history and important support for park staff as they seek to make decisions and implement policy. Such histories can show the problems of the past and their links to the present, offer road maps of potential solutions as well as options to avoid, and provide background for discussion and decision-making.

Unlike most federal agencies, the Park Service presents history to the public. This creates an enhanced awareness of history within the agency, which translates into the capability to use its own past for management purposes. Administrative histories are an excellent way to present that past in an effective manner.

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